

# INNOVATION IN TRAVEL

HELEN READ, DIDGERI AIR ART

THE  
**JAGUAR**  
AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE

Helen Read's personal collection of Aboriginal art is currently touring regional galleries around the country. The exhibition is entitled *A Thousand Journeys* – an apt reflection of Helen's own journeys in life, from Somerset in England, to Nigeria and to outback Australia, and the many journeys she has taken others on to the heartland of Australia and into the isolated communities of the country's original inhabitants, introducing them to Aboriginal artists and cultural custodians. Along the way, she provides travellers on her Didgeri Air Art Tours with rare insight and knowledge, and fosters understanding, communication, connection with the land, and art.

And she always knew the direction she was heading. As a child in England, she recalls, her Australian mother had one curious object she had brought with her from her homeland: a boomerang. "One of my earliest memories is of asking my mother what it was," says Helen. "She explained about Aboriginal people and Australia. I said 'I'm going to live in Australia with Aboriginal people'."

After working as a nurse in Nigeria, Helen realised she needed to learn to fly to effectively reach isolated communities. She emigrated to Australia and, through a scholarship from the Robyn Miller Dicks Memorial Foundation, was able to get her commercial pilot's license.

Working in outback communities and flying over the starkly beautiful landscapes of the Northern Territory and northwestern Australia, she recalls, "I was able to see the thousands of layers of different meanings in the landscape and I fell in love with Aboriginal art and that feeling of country, heart, mind and life within it."

In 1987, Helen started Didgeri Air Art Tours, flying up to five people at a time in her C185 aircraft ("The Jaguar of light planes," she says with pride) around Arnhem Land, the Tiwi Islands, the Kimberley and Western Deserts, visiting remote communities. "I wanted to help these communities by bringing whitefellas into Aboriginal lands in a respectful way, with the correct diplomacy and etiquette, to encourage more understanding. The whole thing is about health, about care of

people. By more white people being informed about Aboriginal art and culture, the more people there will be to influence government policy."



Adrian Lander

Above, Helen Read, with her C185 aircraft at Alice Springs. Below left, Helen and artist Andrea Nungarrayi Martin discuss her work, *Feral Cats with Possum Dreaming* at the Warlukurlangu Art Centre, Yuendumu.

Because the 22 communities Helen reaches on her tours are so far-flung, the logistics can be daunting. Food, water and linen must be carried or sent out in swags before each tour, and permits approved to visit the communities.

Helen's knowledge of Aboriginal art, and her personal relationships with leading artists, enables her passengers to buy high-quality art directly from the art cooperatives. But she also imbues in her travellers her own love of the landscape.

"I fly lower than larger aircraft," she says, "so you can see the country clearly. Early one morning recently, we flew over the Southern Kimberley. The colours were soft, the air crisp and it looked like a magical prehistoric landscape. It was so beautiful, it makes you feel a deep love for our country."

Some repeat customers have been on Helen's tours up to six times – testament to the unique and always varied experience she offers.

"It's thrilling and it's educational," says Helen, "and often it changes people's lives."

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